Khazar Theory – The Myth Of The Khazar Jews

Khazar Jews Theory (1) – Where did Russia's Jews Originate?

Most Russian Jews are descendants of the Khazar Jews. Khazar Jews originate from Persian Jews and Byzantine Jews, that means they are of Jewish heritage/bloodline. “Khazar Jews” is just an alternative name for the Persian/Byzantine/Russian Jews.

According to the Russian historian and ethnologist Leon Gumilev, the Khazar Turks moved to the Volga delta in the third century A.D. Other related Turkish peoples, who used Khazaria as a base for their military operations between 558 and 650 A.D., played the most important role in the development of the Khazar Turks. In the 10th century A.D., the Khazar Turks stubbornly (and successfully) defended themselves against the Arabs, the strongest and most aggressive military power of the day, as they expanded outward from the Arabian Peninsula. The rise of the Khazar Turks lasted for about 150 years - from the middle of the 7th century to the end of the 8th century, at which point the Jews arrested their development.

The first Jews who arrived in Khazaria were fleeing just persecution for anti-government activities in Persia. A second large immigration took place in the 8th century when a large number of Jews left Byzantium to co-operate with the Arabs, which was caused by economic competition from the Greeks and the Armenians. In 723, Emperor Leo III of Byzantium attempted to force Byzantine Jews to adopt Christianity.

The original population of Khazaria remained agricultural, whilst the Jewish arrivals became commercial. Jewish merchants (known as "Radokhnids") in Khazaria immediately took control of the caravan routes between Europe and China. These new merchants were especially interested in the slave trade.

The Kaganate of Khazaria was a powerful kingdom. The King, or Kagan, received expensive gifts from wealthy Jews and had many Jewish women in his harem.

Many children of mixed race were born in the 8th century. These children, and the Jewish people themselves, began to call them-selves Khazars in the 10th century. The original populace may be called Khazar Turks, the newcomers Khazar Jews.

Khazar Jews Theory (2) – Ashkenazi Jews Are Not Descended From Khazars

Since the late 19th century, the so-called “Khazarian theory” has promoted the idea that a bulk of Ashkenazic Jews living in Eastern Europe are descendants of the Khazar kingdom, a mostly Turkic people whose king and nobility converted to Judaism in the early eighth century, allowing them to become a buffer state between Islam and Christendom.

When the Khazar kingdom collapsed in the 13th century, according to the believers in the Khazar theory, its population fled into Eastern Europe and served as the core of European Jewry.

Nonetheless, the Khazar theory had its advocates. It was popularized in 1976 by Arthur Koestler in his book, “The Thirteenth Tribe”. It again was revived in 2008 with the publication of Shlomo Sand’s “The Invention of the Jewish People”, which became a best seller and was translated into several languages, Sand claims that that Ashkenazi Jews are descended from the people of the Khazar kingdom, who in the eighth century converted en masse on the instruction of their king.

Shaul Stampfer, an Israeli historian, in his article “Jewish Social Studies”, he concludes that there is no evidence to support this assertion. “Such a conversion, even though it’s a wonderful story, never happened,” Stampfer said.

Stampfer, analyzed material from various fields, but found no reliable source for the claim that the Khazars – a multiethnic kingdom that included Iranians, Turks, Slavs and Circassians – converted to Judaism. “There never was a conversion by the Khazar king or the Khazar elite,” he said. “The conversion of the Khazars is a myth with no factual basis.”

Stampfer said he was surprised to discover how hard it is “to prove that something didn’t happen. Until now, most of my research has been aimed at discovering or clarifying what did happen in the past ... It’s a much more difficult challenge to prove that something didn’t happen than to prove it did.”

That’s because the proof is based primarily on the absence of evidence rather than its presence – like the fact that an event as unprecedented as an entire kingdom’s conversion to Judaism merited

no mention in contemporaneous sources. “The silence of so many sources about the Khazars’ Judaism is very suspicious,” Stampfer said. “The Byzantines, the geonim [Jewish religious leaders of the sixth to eleventh centuries], the sages of Egypt – none of them have a word about the Jewish Khazars.”

Despite this institutional backing, the theory is absolutely without evidence. As any historian will tell you, generations of Jews, like generations of any people, leave historical traces behind them. These traces come in multiple forms. For starters, people leave behind them historical documents and archaeological data. Predictably, archaeologic evidence about the widespread existence of Jews in Khazaria is almost nonexistent. While a series of independent sources does testify to the existence in the 10th century of Jews in the Kingdom of Khazaria, and while some of these sources also indicate that the ruling elite of Khazaria embraced Judaism, the Khazarian state was destroyed by Russians during the 960s. In other words, we can be confident that Judaism was not particularly widespread in that kingdom.

The next historical record of Jews — in a few cities that today belong to western Ukraine and western Belarus — shows up in the 14th century, when Jews are regularly referred to in numerous documents. And yet, no direct historiographical data is available to connect the Jews who lived in Eastern Europe in the 14th century with their co-religionists from the 10th-century Khazaria.

One city in northwest Ukraine, Volodymyr-Volynskyi, does seem to have an uninterrupted presence of Jews from the 12th century. For example, in 1171 a Jewish merchant called Benjamin from that city lived in Cologne, and a Russian document refers to local Jews in 1288. Another Jewish source describes a circumcision ceremony in that city at the end of the 14th century. But it is only during the 16th century that references to Jews appear in large territories of Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania, and even in the mid-16th century local communities were not populous. Historical documents also indicate that the earliest known Jewish communities in Poland were all situated in its westernmost part.

The Khazar theory was strange. If only a small number of Khazars in the court of their king converted to Judaism, then how could they become the basis for the masses of European Jewry? Arab historians in the 10th century reported that most of the Khazars were Muslims, in any case.

But history is not the only discipline to debunk the Khazarian hypothesis. Linguistics, too, and the study of Yiddish help us rule out a Khazarian ancestry for today’s Jews. Since the 17th century, Yiddish was the vernacular language of all Jews of Eastern Europe. If the Khazars, whose language was close to Turkish, were the source for European Jews, then why did Yiddish evolve as a European Jewish language that was linguistically close to German, but not to Turkish or any other Central Asian language?

It is the lexicon that keeps the actual traces of languages spoken by ancestors of Yiddish speakers. For that reason, in addition to Hebrew and Aramaic words, Yiddish has a small set of words whose roots come from Old French, Old Czech and Greek. All its main structural elements are German, they also underwent a strong influence of Slavic languages.

In addition to history and linguistics, a third discipline can help us put to rest the Khazarian hypothesis: onomastics, or the study of proper names. Looking at names, both first names and surnames, gives us a sense of how a community saw itself, its language and its origins. And in the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe over the past six centuries, not a single Turkic name can be found in documents listing Jewish names. Even in documents from the 15th and 16th centuries dealing with Jews who lived in the territories of modern Ukraine and Belarus have no such names.

In the corpus of given names used by Jews of Eastern Europe during the last centuries, we find the same linguistic layers as in the lexicon of Yiddish. There are numerous Germanic and Hebrew names and some Aramaic names. There are also Greek names (Todres from Theodoros, Kalmen from Kalonymos), Old French names (Beyle, Bunem, Yentl), Old Czech names (Khlavne, Slave, Zlate), and Polish names (Basye, Tsile), and very few East Slavic names (Badane, Vikhne). There are no Turkic names.